

Rice's Gas Station Complex
Kimmerly Lots
Avon Vicinity
Powell County
Montana

HABS No. MT-78

HABS
MONT,
39-AVO.V,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS NO. MT-78

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MONT,
39-AVO. V,
1-

RICE'S GAS STATION COMPLEX

Location: NW 1/4 NW 1/4 Section 27, Township 10 North,
Range 8 West, Avon, Montana

Present Owner: Heirs of Sandy and Olive Mae Reiersen

Present Occupant
and Use: Abandoned

Statement of
Significance: The gas station and motel are examples of 1930s filling station and automobile-related commercial lodging facilities made popular with new highway construction and increased automobile use at the time. The buildings' vernacular architecture is punctuated with a few elements of the Spanish architectural style, including stucco finish, a wood door with two arched windows in the motel, and a parapet wall on the gas station. The buildings are examples of increasingly less common structures related to early automobile travel in Montana.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Date of Erection: 1934

Historical Narrative:

Rice's Gas Station was erected near Avon along the highway between Garrison and Helena in 1934 by Charles Rice. The business was operated by one of Charles' sons, Edward, for about 4 years. At about the same time, the motel behind and to the east of the gas station was built.[1] Reportedly, Sandy and Olive Mae Reiersen purchased the parcel from her father, Charles Rice, in 1938.[2] (The title transfer is dated 1947, however.[3]) The log residence that currently stands on the property and adjacent to the filling station and motel was built by the Reiersons in the late 1940s. They operated the business until 1958 when it was permanently closed.[4]

Avon is a small community that stands 32 miles west of the state capital, Helena. The area was first settled by Euro-American farmers and ranchers in the 1870s, but Avon did not develop as an area shipping and supply center until after the Northern Pacific Railroad built a siding there in 1882. In addition to ranching, nineteenth century mining in adjacent areas supported the community.[5] However, Avon's population probably never exceeded 500 residents.

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The property on which the filling station and motel sit was selected by the Northern Pacific Railroad Company in 1886 and patented in 1901.[6] Alfred K. Kimmerly, long-time Avon area resident and major landowner, acquired the 560 acre patented parcel in Section 27 from the railroad company in 1890.[7] The history of the property between 1890 and 1926 could not be followed in Powell County courthouse records. However, probably at the turn of the century Kimmerly divided a portion of the acreage into lots. The parcels, known as the Kimmerly Lots, are situated immediately south of the community of Avon, but on the opposite side of the Northern Pacific tracks. In 1926, Paul and Orelle Louquet sold the 125 x 80 foot parcel on which the gas station now sits to Mrs. Julia Shreeves, an elderly widow, who lived there for the following 7 years.[8] As part of the negotiated right-of-way settlement between Shreeves and the Montana Highway Commission on the 1933 Garrison - Helena highway reconstruction project, the commission bought the woman's two story frame house which stood directly in the path of the new highway route. Shreeves had the option of salvaging the residence, some outbuildings, and fencing; the structures were either moved or destroyed.[9] In April, 1933, Charles Rice purchased the property (less the highway right-of-way), apparently with plans to develop it.[10] Soon after, Rice built one of Avon's first filling stations.

Charles Rice was an early settler in the Little Blackfoot River Valley where Avon is located. He moved from Missouri to Montana in the early 1880s and eventually homesteaded near Finn, a very small community 14 miles north of Avon. In 1910 he built the Avondale Hotel in Avon, and his family operated it until 1947, the year of Charles' death.[11] Rice apparently saw the gas station as a winning proposition, given the then recent construction of the highway that bypassed the main part of Avon.

The phenomenon of gas station construction in the 1930s was widespread across the United States and reflected both the nation's effort to "Get Out of the Mud" and increased reliance on the automobile. And "traffic attracted business to the roadsides." [12] In addition to gas stations,

Motels, for their comfort, convenience, and informality, became a roadside institution. By 1935 some 9,800 tourist courts had been built, and by 1939 the number had grown to 13,500. [13]

The construction and operation of Rice's Gas Station and motel reflected the national trend. In a microcosm, the change within the small community of Avon was very similar to the change in

the tourist industry throughout the country from an emphasis on hotels to the operation of roadside motels on the edge of towns making them more accessible to the traveling public. Charles Rice, owner of the only hotel in Avon, apparently recognized the changing needs of the traveling public and built a motel to cover all the bases.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Architectural Merit and Interest

The architecture of Rice's Gas Station is rather plain and clearly falls under Daniel Vieyra's "Functional" category of American gas station architecture.[14]

"Functional" designs were smooth, clean, and, like a machine, pared of superfluous parts.[15]

However, the vernacular architectural style of the gas station and motel incorporates some Spanish and Mission style elements such as the plain stucco finish, parapet wall, and two arched windows in one of the doors.

B. Summary Description and Condition

The gas station is a rectangular, 18 by approximately 30 foot, wood-frame structure with stucco finish, poured concrete foundation, and backward sloping shed roof covered with rolled asphalt paper. The front of the structure, which faces north, has a parapet wall and a rectangular wood-frame awning. Two shed-roofed additions stand toward the rear of the building on the east and west sides. There are two interior brick chimneys.

There are two wood-frame double-hung 3-over-1 windows left of center on the front elevation. The three doors that comprise the main entrance to the right of the windows are 4 light vertical 2 panel. On the east and west sides near the front of the building and about halfway back are single 4-over-1 double-hung windows. The windows in the addition are either fixed or horizontally-sliding. A vertical-board door on the east shed addition faces north, or toward the space between the gas station and log residence.

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Two gas pumps stand on a concrete pad in front of the gas station. These Tolkein brand pumps apparently date to the 1940s.[16] Formerly, a disk-shaped light stood on the top of each[17], but those were removed many years ago.

The former gas station is in poor condition. The stucco is peeling off the building, the windows have been boarded over, and, during a recent windstorm, a limb of a nearby cottonwood tree fell through the wood awning over the entrance.

The complex includes a motel (HABS No. MT-78-A), a log house (HABS No. MT-78-B), and a privy (HABS No. MT-78-C).

C. Site and Surroundings

Rice's Gas Station and associated buildings are situated immediately adjacent to U.S. Highway 12. A hay field borders the small lot on the east, west, and south. The former Northern Pacific Railroad Company section house stands across the highway from the gas station. The small community of Avon stands further to the north, beyond the Burlington Northern Railroad tracks.

PART III. END NOTES

1. Avon Get Together Club, Our Neighborhood: Newsy and Nosey. (Spokane: Evergreen Press, 1949), p. 9; and Heritage Research Center, "Avon/Elliston Highway Improvement Project, RF 8-1(4)34, Impact Upon Cultural Resources" (Missoula, 1985), submitted to Montana Department of Highways, Helena, p. 31.
2. Ibid.
3. Powell County, "Deed Books" (Deer Lodge), Vol. 36, p. 525.
4. Heritage Research Center, p. 32.
5. Ibid., pp. 11-14.
6. General Land Office, "Tract Records, Township 10 North, Range 8 West, Montana," copy on file at Montana Historical Society Library, Helena.

7. Powell County, Vol. 5, p. 270, and Vol. 11, p. 241.
8. Powell County (July 6, 1926)
9. Montana Highway Commission, "Right-of-Way File" (Helena, 1933).
10. Powell County, Vol. 27, p. 92; and H.C. Tilzey, Montana Highway Commission Division Engineer, correspondence to W. O. Whipps, MHC Administrative Engineer, June 17, 1933, copy on file at Montana Department of Highways Right-of-Way Bureau, Helena.
11. Avon Get Together Club, pp. 7, 8, 59, 101.
12. John A. Jakle, The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 120.
13. Ibid., p. 166.
14. Daniel I. Vieyra, "Fill 'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1979), pp. 56-77.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Avon Get Together Club, photographs on unnumbered page.

PART IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Avon Get Together Club. Our Neighborhood: Newsy and Nosey. Spokane: Evergreen Press, 1949.

General Land Office. Tract Records, on file at Montana Historical Society Library, Helena.

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Montana Highway Commission. Right-of-Way file for Julia Shreeves, Helena, 1933.

Powell County, Montana. Deed Books, on file at Powell County Courthouse, Deer Lodge.

Tilzey, H.C. Montana Highway Commission Division Engineer. Correspondence from Tilzey to W.O. Whipps, MHC Administrative Engineer, June 17, 1933. Copy on file at Right-of-Way Bureau, Montana Department of Highways, Helena.

Vieyra, Daniel I. "Fill 'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1979.

PART V. PROJECT INFORMATION

Rice's Gas Station lies along that section of U.S. Highway 12 that is currently being reconstructed in the vicinity of Avon and Elliston. Montana Department of Highways designed the new roadway to minimize impacts to the historic property. However, the gas pumps will be removed from the parcel. The four structures at the site will not be physically impacted by the project. Because of the type of impact, site recordation has been limited to a general site description and photodocumentation that concentrates on the gas station and the pumps rather than illustrating all structures.

Recently, property owners Sandy and Olive Mae Reiersen died. Subsequently, the windows were boarded over. For reasons of both economy and physical limitations, the heirs will probably never use the existing structures for commercial purposes. The buildings will eventually be destroyed and the land converted to hay field or pasture.

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